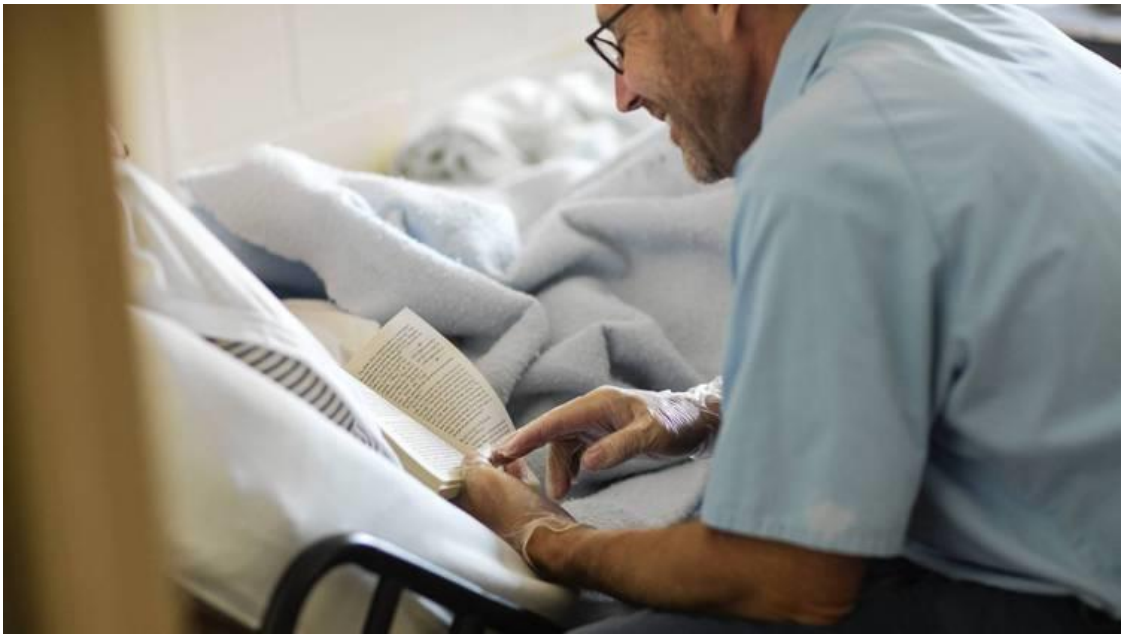
Chicago Tribune

Illinois prison hospice offers care, redemption

Volunteering in a prison hospice can give inmates perspective — and maybe even redemption.



(ZBIGNIEW BZDAK, CHICAGO TRIBUNE) *Inmate Ralph Pollock, 55, reads a book and interacs with a hospice patient at Dixon Correctional Center in Dixon. Pollock has been caring for the same patient for two-and-a-half-years.*

August 10, 2014 By Barbara Brotman, Chicago Tribune

Ralph Pollock, in the ninth year of a 25-year sentence for a drunken driving crash that killed two children, bent forward in his chair, rested the book on the bed in front of him and quietly read to a man lying under a blanket.

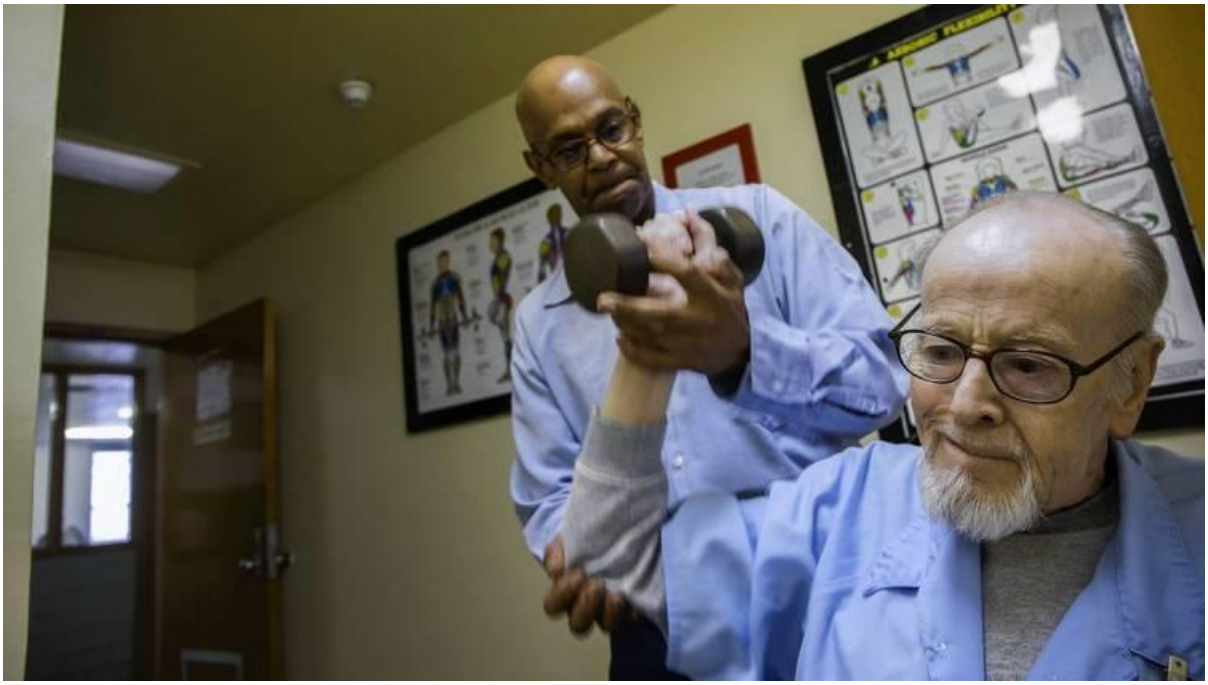
Propped up against a pillow, his eyes closed, the man listened as Pollock read from "The Purpose Driven Life."

The man's life is drawing to a close. He no longer speaks, but Pollock understands him nonetheless.

"Just by his squeezing me or looking at me, I know if he's uncomfortable, or if he wants something, or if he's just angry and just doesn't want to put up with things," Pollock said. "I kind of know his moods, just by sitting with him."

Pollock, 55, is a volunteer in the hospice program for prisoners at Dixon Correctional Center, one of only about 20 prison hospices nationwide where the caregivers are inmates.

Both patients and caregivers have been convicted of grievous crimes. But the hospice program is based on the belief that everyone deserves compassion as they are dying. And the program's supporters say inmates who extend that compassion as volunteers can be transformed. The infirmary where the dying receive hospice care is in the prison's health care unit. The walls are cream-colored cinder block; the rooms have large windows that look out onto the prison grounds. The shelves in the small day room hold Dick Francis novels, a copy of "The Spiritual Survival Guide for Prison and Beyond" and a 1980 World Book Encyclopedia set.

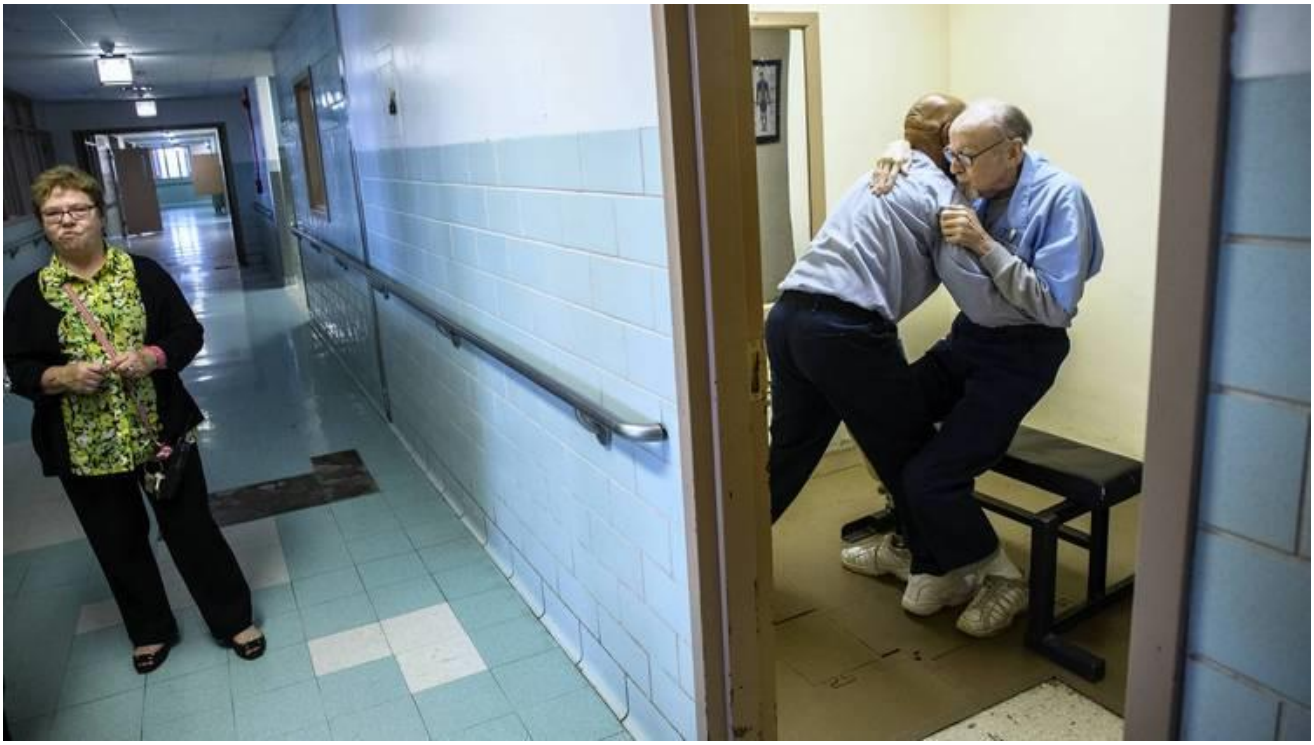


(ZBIGNIEW BZDAK, CHICAGO TRIBUNE) *Caregiver Eugene McDaniel, 62, left, works with fellow inmate Lambert Knol, 80, in the exercise room in the Adult Care Unit at Dixon Correctional Center.*

Pollock has been caring for the same patient for 21/2 years. Four days a week, he comes here and reads to his patient, bathes him, helps him to the bathroom.

"I give him a bath practically every time I'm up there, just because it's some kind of activity, gets him out of bed," Pollock said. "Even if he grumbles sometimes, I think, 'Well, I'll wait a little while and talk him into it.'"

Prison officials considered the patient too ill to consent to be interviewed or named, and they declined to reveal his condition. Most patients in hospice care have cancer. Prisoners in hospice are assured that when the time comes, they will not die alone.



(ZBIGNIEW BZDAK, CHICAGO TRIBUNE） Pollock also finds comfort in the hospice, where he has forged a genuine relationship with his patient while also receiving, perhaps, some kind of redemption.

In 2005, Pollock was drunk when he ran a red light on Mannheim Road near O'Hare International Airport. His pickup truck collided with a van carrying a family returning after a vacation in Europe. The van burst into flames, killing a 5-year-old boy and his 14-year-old sister.

"I shouldn't have been behind the wheel in 2005 driving drunk," he said, sitting in a meeting room at the infirmary.

"I know the damage that I've done to that family. And I know that I can't pay that back. But I know that I can do good things with what's left of my life."

Such are the dual benefits of the prison hospice, said Cheryl Price, who helped design the prison program and served as its coordinator for 17 years until she retired at the end of July.

The inmates who are patients get one-on-one care, "the opportunity in what can be perceived a noncaring environment to latch onto someone whose interest is them and them solely," Price said.

Many inmates receiving hospice care have no family contacts, she said; they have been away too long or their crime drove their families away. The prison is their family. And in hospice, they know a member of that family will be with them to the end.

The prisoners who volunteer can become different men

"It changes them," Price said. "They find out things about themselves that they never knew. They find out that relationships are important; they find out that caring is important."

And some get a chance to try to make amends for their crimes.

"I think that a lot of us, at least I know myself, that have done such a disastrous deed, we do feel an obligation to want to give back, to want to help," said Eugene McDaniel Jr., 62, a onetime Wheaton police officer who is serving a 60-year sentence for killing his wife.

Like McDaniel, most of the inmates who volunteer for the hospice are serving time for murder.

"They would like some method of atonement," Price said, "some way of showing that they are not bad people, that they want to be able to do work that tells them and tells other people, 'I did change; I can be a better person.'"

(ZBIGNIEW BZDAK, CHICAGO TRIBUNE) Dixon's warden, Nedra Chandler, said the volunteers provide an important service for no tangible gain.

"I thank God every day for the inmates who are willing to do this, because they get nothing from us," she said. "They do it out of the goodness of their heart and their willingness to assist their fellow man."

Earl Johnson, 56, who is serving an 80-year sentence for killing a man during the robbery of a South Side store, volunteered for the hospice to soften the harshness of prison life.

"Prison sometimes has an effect where it hardens you. By doing this here, I wanted to try to not be hardened by this prison experience," he said. "It's hard to explain, but I wanted to keep my humility or whatever — to be able to care for another human being and not just walk through here just like a zombie."

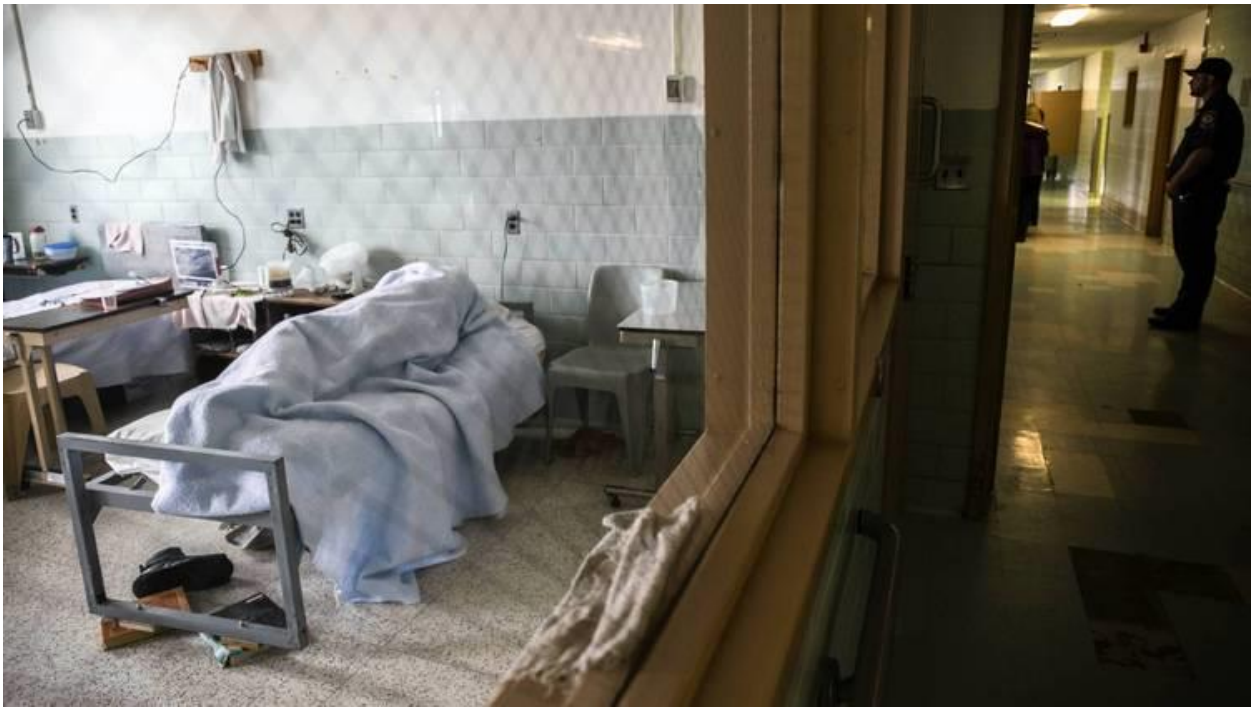
Johnson developed a kind of friendship with his patient that he did not find with other inmates.

"I used to take him outside as often as I possibly can, to get him out, make sure he does things like walking about and stuff like that," he said. "We'd sit out, talk, do his laundry. Whatever he wanted to do, I just was there for him.

"We talked about more things" than sports or prison jobs, he said. "I was able to talk about my family; he was able to talk about his family. Things you probably didn't share with someone else."

The hospice at Dixon, which began accepting patients in 1995, was one of the first programs of its kind in the country, Price said.

The need for hospice care is clear. The number of older inmates in Illinois has grown with the increase in the total prison population, the advent of longer sentences and the fact that inmates are serving more time because of truth-in-sentencing laws.



(ZBIGNIEW BZDAK, CHICAGO TRIBUNE) *An inmate sleeps in the Health Care Unit at Dixon Correctional Center*

(Story continued next three pages)

From June 2005 to June 2014, the number of prisoners 65 and older in Illinois prisons increased from 278 to 706.

The Dixon program was modeled after community hospice programs. Price was executive director of Hospice of the Rock River Valley before becoming coordinator of the prison's

hospice and adult care program in 1997. She and other community hospice officials helped design the program and trained the prison staff and the first volunteers.

A central tenet of the community hospice is having lay volunteers visit patients. "We felt very strongly that inmates should serve as the volunteers," Price said. "This is their community."

Inmates proved eager to serve

"Every year we get about 40 to 50 men who apply for the position," Price said. "Generally between six and eight men are selected. It's a very elite group, in a sense. They go through a very, very thorough evaluation process."

Those accepted undergo five or six months of training and then are assigned a patient, either in hospice or adult care, on the floor that is the prison's equivalent of a nursing home.

The work is personal, intimate. Volunteers hold patients' hands, wipe their sweaty brows, change soiled diapers.

"We have to, first of all, desensitize ourselves," McDaniel said. "We come to the penitentiary and say, 'I'm a man. I don't want to touch another man, I don't want to rub another man's face or touch particular parts and so forth.'

"But we rise above that. That's a human being."

"They do things they never thought they could do," Price said.

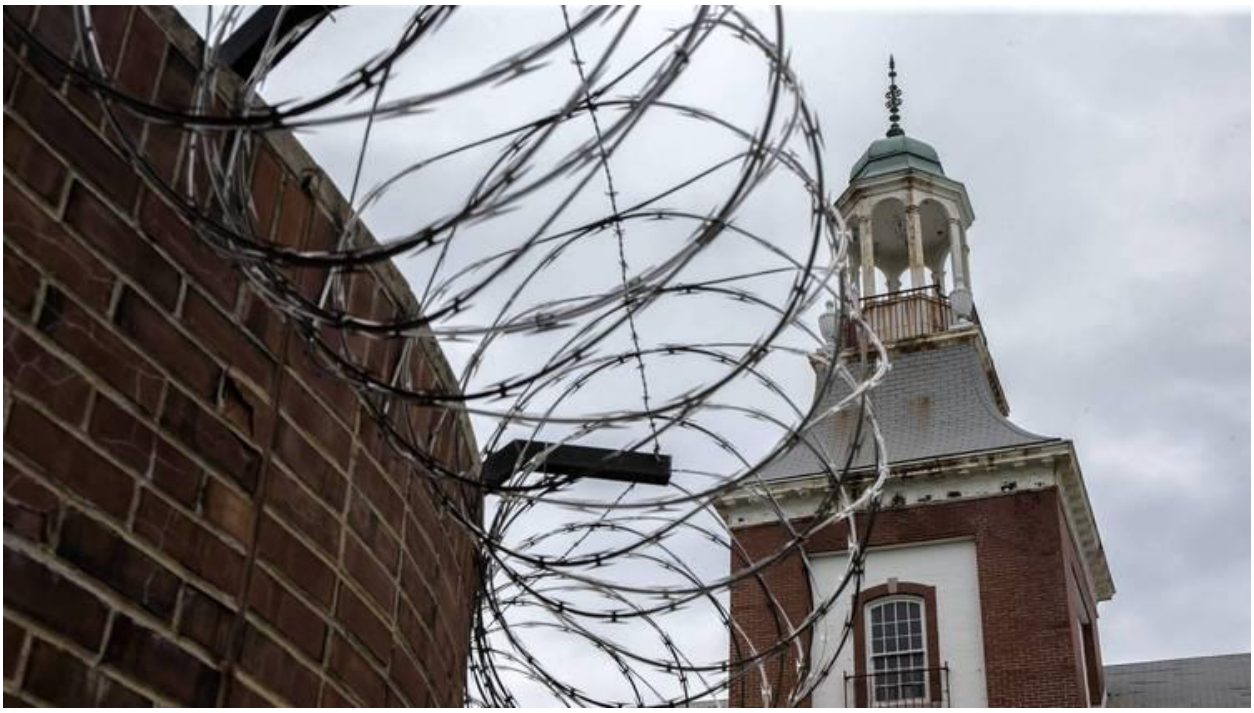
She has been touched by their gentleness.

"The (way) they are able to assist somebody ... to cover them with a blanket, or just stroke their forehead or reposition them in a chair. They are just able to do it with such care and tenderness," she said.

"Many of them didn't know they had that (in) them."

Only about 20 of the 75 or so prison hospices around the country use inmates as volunteers, said Edgar Barens, a filmmaker whose short-subject documentary on an Iowa prison hospice, "Prison Terminal: The Last Days of Private Jack Hall," was nominated for an Academy Award.

Barens, visiting media specialist at the Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago, also directed a film about the hospice at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola that has been used for training by prisons that want to start hospices.



(ZBIGNIEW BZDAK, CHICAGO TRIBUNE) *Dixon Correctional Center, Dixon, IL*

Inmates can be transformed by being trusted with someone's last moments on earth, he said. And seeing a person they have come to care about die, he said, gives some murderers insight into their crime.

"For people who have taken a life, to be with someone who is passing away really puts that perspective on exactly what they did and how that victim's death affected that victim's family," Barens said.

Gregory Hockerman is the father of the two children killed in the crash Pollock caused; he was driving the van filled with his family. Told by the Tribune of Pollock's work in the prison hospice, he was supportive.

"I was just struck by how, in a way, his response is paralleling our response," Hockerman said. "Not that we feel like we have to make amends, but you ask yourself, 'What can we do in the light of what happened to make the world a better place?'"

Hockerman and his wife are active in an anti-drunken driving organization in Indiana. Volunteering for the prison hospice is "something (Pollock) can do under the circumstances, and it is constructive," he said.

The brother of the man Johnson shot to death in 1978 was less forgiving when told of Johnson's hospice work.

"I wish he was the one dying," said the brother, who asked not to be named. "He ruined our family forever."

Ronald Hammond, whose sister was McDaniel's wife and victim, does not think McDaniel is volunteering out of any sense of repentance.

"I do not buy it," he said. "He never apologized to me or my family. Never."

As for the inmates receiving hospice care, Price said she can understand if some might think murderers don't deserve death with dignity.

"I wouldn't blame any family member (of victims) in particular who had those feelings," she said. "But it can't affect the work that we do."

Warden Chandler said she sees no reason hospice care should be denied to prisoners. "They have the right to die with as much dignity and compassion as anybody on the streets. They're still human beings" she said.

"It's a difficult thing, dying in prison, anyway. Shame on us for not doing all we can ... so that they can go to that next phase, whatever that is, feeling (that) even though they didn't have family, that they had someone who showed love and emotion for them, that they mattered."

As a patient's death draws near, the prison hospice tries to arrange a 24-hour vigil, even summoning inmate volunteers at 2 a.m.

Johnson was with his patient almost every day as the end neared.

"You sit there with him," he said. "He couldn't talk so I would talk to him and stuff like that, and he'd be able to hear my voice. Maybe that gave him some comfort or something like that because it was a familiar voice.

"It was just a humbling experience to be able to sit there and to be able to do that for him. Nobody should die alone."

The man died July 18, and he was not alone.